

PBS MACNEIL/LEHRER NEWSHOUR

12 April 1984

PROGRAM
INTRODUCTION

LEHRER: Good evening. It was a news day again dominated by the Nicaragua mine story as the House prepared to follow the lead of the Senate in soundly condemning U.S. involvement. Also, that satellite called Solar Max went back into orbit. Retail sales were reported down significantly. And President Reagan again claimed credit for saving the economy. Robin?

MACNEIL: On the Newshour tonight, the furor over U.S. involvement in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors is again our main focus. Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Dam is here to explain the administration position.

MACNEIL: Last night we showed an extended excerpt from the hearings of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, with members showing the anger at the Reagan administration. Their immediate target was Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Dam, and he is with us this evening.

MACNEIL: Mr. Secretary, ah, the House resolution that's going to be voted on later this evening calls for a halt to U.S. involvement in the mining. It's been reported that that mining has already stopped and the U.S. involvement in it's stopped, but can you confirm that that is so? KENNETH DAM (Deputy Secretary of State): What has been the practice of a number of administrations, ah, administration officials are not in position to talk about alleged covert action. There is a system for discussing covert action, and I must say that every administration has had a covert action program of one kind or another. That system involves going before the intelligence committees and talking about it there. And that's what I'm left with. So I can't address that question.

MACNEIL: I see. I just wonder why when so many of your fellow senior administration, your fellow senior officials in the administration have been willing to talk to reporters anonymously and confirm in very precise detail or say in very precise detail, spell out the U.S. assistance to this mining process why it is not admitted publicly. DAM: Well, it's a simple fact that there are rules. These rules were established by the Congress. The system for dealing with this was established by the Congress in one of the great reforms of the 1970s, and we're following that system.

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MACNEIL: Senator Goldwater said he was told, in his letter to CIA Director Casey, said he was told that President Reagan himself had approved the mining in writing. Is that true, to your knowledge? DAM: Well, let me put it this way. All covert action programs are approved by the president or they don't go forward.

MACNEIL: You said yesterday that, in your appearance that we showed on our program last night, that the con aid, U.S. aid for the contras, which is not denied, ah, does not mean that anything goes. What does it mean, then? Does it mean that the U.S. approves each action that the contras take, that is taken with U.S. assistance? DAM: Well, that's a rather complicated question. Before any covert action program is started, ah, a, ah, finding is filed with the appropriate committees in the Congress, the Intelligence committees, and that's reviewed and discussed. There has been a regular review by those committees of those activities. And, ah, that occurs quite frequently. And so, just because money is voted doesn't necessarily mean that any particular activities are carried out. There are decisions within the executive branch about that. And the Congress, through its intelligence committees, is briefed as to what the activities are.

MACNEIL: Well, in saying that U.S. aid for the contras doesn't mean that anything goes, is that not another way of saying the contras don't do things with our money that we don't like? DAM: No, I didn't mean to suggest that. Now, what we have in the, ah, case of Nicaragua is a legitimate armed opposition. Take the case of *Eden Pastora. He was a member of the Sandinistas at the time of the revolution. He left the Sandinistas because he felt that they had stolen the revolution from him. He established his own arm. That's a legitimate thing. Now if, ah, for example, and you're getting me into a situation where it's difficult to talk about this under the ground rules, but if the United States were to support him, that would not mean that we could control him. And, ah, I think it's, ah, a fact that the contras in Nicaragua have received aid from, or assistance from various sources.

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MACNEIL: Un huh. The administration keeps saying, ah, ah, Ambassador Kirkpatrick repeated it today, in the speech we showed a an excerpt from, that the Nicaraguan Sandinistas are continuing their aid to the guerrillas in El Salvador. Many people have said, members of Congress said it, I think, to you yesterday, and the Nicaraguan foreign minister said it to us the other day on this program, 'If you have that proof, why don't you show it?' Why, why doesn't the administration show the evidence it has. DAM: Well, we've showed a lot of evidence having to do with the flow of arms into Nicaragua. What is talked about is, 'Show us the actual rifles that you've captured.' That's not the nature of, ah, of an interdiction program. What we're trying to do to, so far as we are involved in, ah, in, ah, support for activities of this kind, ah, what we would be concerned with is trying to divert them from El Salvador. I might say that the House Intelligence Committee has, has studied this question. And it's composed of a majority of Democrats, including many Democrats who do not, do not support the administration on our Central American policy. And they have found in writing, after reviewing all of the evidence, that there is a very substantial flow of arms to El Salvador from Nicaragua. And their proposal was to build a fence around El Salvador. They said, 'That's how to do it.' I think that's fairly ridiculous as a proposal, but nevertheless, this was thoroughly vetted by that committee.

MACNEIL: Well, if the United States has concrete evidence, as it had in the case of the Cuban missile crisis, why doesn't it use that to appeal either in international law or simply to world public opinion and thereby defend the criticism among allies like, ah, like the French and, ah, and rally congressional support? DAM: Well, I frankly don't think that in the international community, including with the French, there's any doubt about this. So the French may criticize one action or another, but I haven't heard them say that there is no arms flow, ah, from Nicaragua to El Salvador. Now, what we have here is a typical situation of a closed society in Nicaragua. It's not like the United States. It's not a situation where the Nicaraguans have to go to a congressional hearing, where they're interviewed on national television, where they're asked to come up with the evidence. They simply can make an assertion, and there's no way to question them. What, but from our point of view, what we have is, where we're dealing with intelligence information, we have a problem that's referred to in government as the sources of methods problem. We cannot lay our evidence on the table without revealing to the Nicaraguans, to the Cubans, to the Soviets exactly the nature of our, of our information. If, for example, we were to overhear a communication, then if we

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were to reveal that, I guarantee you we wouldn't have the opportunity to overhear a similar communication in the future.

MACNEIL: Thank you. Jim?

LEHRER: Mr. Secretary, speaking of the Soviets and the French, both have come forward and volunteered to aid the Nicaraguans in sweeping the mines from the harbors. From the U.S. point of view, which would be the best option?

DAM: You mean whether we'd rather have the French or....

LEHRER: Or the Soviets do it. DAM: Well, I don't think that either government, to my knowledge, is unqualifiedly said that it would do so, first of all. The last thing that I heard from the Soviets was that they would consider it. But the language was very carefully designed to avoid the, ah, that. Perhaps I've missed something. But in any event, ah, obviously, this is not the central question. The central question is not the Soviet clearing of mines but the Soviet support for the kinds of activities that Nicaragua's carrying out.

LEHRER: But, ah, you folks over at the State Department must have considered the possibility that the Soviets might do this and that there could be an incident as a result of it off the coast of Nicaragua. Is that, is that not even, you haven't even considered that? DAM: I don't, if the Soviets decide to clear the mines in Nicaragua, I'm sure they will do. It's not very difficult. These are a very primitive technology, and I don't see what the problem is.

LEHRER: Would, would that be an escalation, from the U.S. point of view, of this whole matter, if Soviet ships went in there and did that? DAM: There are plenty of Soviet ships coming in now, delivering armaments, delivering heavy weapons, delivering other weapons of war. We think that's the escalation.

LEHRER: I see. So it'd be no big deal if the Soviets went in there? DAM: Well, it, ah, I, we'll have to consider exactly how we will respond. But let me say this, that the Soviets are creating the problem already. It's not a question of whether they might create a problem in the future.

LEHRER: And you'd just as soon as the French didn't do it either? DAM: I don't really have any opinion on that.

LEHRER: Have, have, have, has the, does the U.S. have an opinion that has been expressed to the French? DAM: We've discussed this question with the French, yes.

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LEHRER: And what, what has, what have you said to them?

DAM: Well, I don't like to comment on our, ah, on our diplomatic communications. But, ah, there might be better places for the French to put mine-sweepers, if they have them.

LEHRER: I mean the, the irony of one of our allies going in and taking out mines that were put there with the assistance of U.S. CIA money, et cetera, is rather weird, right? DAM: It's, it's an irony.

LEHRER: It's an irony. DAM: But I, but I really think that the question of clearing the mines is not the central question.

LEHRER: The, ah, there have been reports, Mr. Secretary, that you and Secretary Shultz were both opposed to this mining thing in the first place. Are those reports correct? DAM: They're incorrect. I do not, ah, in any way, ah, deny the, the support of the State Department for, for any programs that the president has decided upon. And, in fact, in the general area of Central America, the State Department's in full support of the administration's programs.

LEHRER: You've been the point man on the, since all this uproar began on Monday or Tuesday. You were the guy who was sent up the Hill yesterday to take it, and, ah, and et cetera. What is, after a couple of day snow, what is your explanation of why there is such a huge uproar, 84-to-12 in the Senate, probably gonna be similar tonight in the House. What's the problem? DAM: Well, I think with regard to the vote, ah, that is fairly easily explained. As the president said, he does not, he can live with the resolution, which simply says that no appropriated money should be used, ah, for mines. We do not, we are not fighting that, ah, prohibition. We think that it's rather odd, since Congress, ah, ah, has other things that it oughtta be working on, like assistance to El Salvador. But I think that's the explanation for the vote.

LEHRER: Same thing if it happens in the House tonight?

DAM: Yes, I would expect it to happen in the House this evening, although, again, we'll, our formal position is that we are opposed to that.

LEHRER: Speaker O'Neill and others have said that not only is the mining not only in jeopardy but also the \$21 million that you all want in aid for the contra movement, generally. First of all, do you agree it's in jeopardy? And second, if it does in fact fail, if Congress fails to appropriate it, what happens? DAM: Well, let me approach the first problem. First of all, the Senate Intelligence Committee voted unanimously for support for programs in

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Nicaragua. Secondly, the, the Senate passed this by very large margin. now there has been this flap this week, and there's a certain furor, as you put it, about it. But Congress is going home to night for an 11-day recess for Easter. And when they come back and they've heard what the people of the country really say, then I think it's the time to assess whether or not the \$21 million is in danger.

LEHRER: You think that the public supports this effort?

DAM: I think that the effort is controversial. But I think the emphasis on the mining is something that takes away from the fundamental question. And the fundamental question is this. What is the proper policy for the United States in a situation in which we have this kind of subversion of neighboring governments, by Nicaragua, in a region which, as the bipartisan commission said, is vital to the security of the United States? Shall we just stand back and say, 'Well, that's very interesting?' Now there are some people, not in the administration, say what we should do is, we should put American armed forces in there and do something about it. Surely, that's not a good option. So if we're serious about doing something here, then I think we have to consider the question of how this vote should come out.

LEHRER: But the mining of the harbors in Nicaragua is no longer an option for the administration? DAM: Well, if this sense of Congress resolution passes, the president has said he can live with it, and that, ah, I'm sure we will abide by the sense of Congress.

LEHRER: In exchange.... DAM: Even though there's not, ah....

LEHRER: In exchange for the \$21 million, the administration is willing to say to Congress, 'OK, there'll never be any more money. The United States will never, in any way, support the mining of Nicaragua's harbors.' DAM: Well, that hasn't, that question hasn't been put to us. But certainly we've said that we can live with this particular resolution, which addresses mining. It, ah, it, ah, Congress has the right to change its mind in the future.

LEHRER: Do you think Congress is handling this in a responsible manner? DAM: I think it's handling it in a responsible manner, but what, ah, manner, but what I'm concerned about is twofold. First of all, the House is not acting. Now this is even more serious in the case of El Salvador. Congress is going home tonight, won't be back till a week from Tuesday. Meanwhile, particularly in the case of El Salvador, the need is now. And the administration really has to take the responsibility.

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LEHRER: That's the additional money. What is it 60, what is? DAM: Sixty-one million.

LEHRER: Sixty-one million. DAM: Uh huh.

LEHRER: In addition to the 21 for the contras. DAM: That's right.

LEHRER: Yeah. DAM: And a similar point can be made about the \$21 million for Nicaragua or with the urgency, with regard to expenditures. It's not quite as good. I say not quite because at some time, it seems to me, the Congress has to face up to whether it really wants to take the responsibility for, ah, for stopping the programs.

LEHRER: Secretary Dam, thank you very much. Robin?

MACNEIL: To further sample editorial opinion, we have with us representatives of three newspapers. From Sacramento, we have Peter Schrag, editorial page editor of the Sacramento Bee. He's with us from Public Station KBIE in Sacramento. From the Manchester, N.H., Union Leader, we have its editor, Joseph McQuaid. He joins us from Public Station WENH in Durham, N.H. And finally, from the Milwaukee Journal, we have editorial writer Richard Foster. He's with us from Washington, where he is based. Starting you, Mr. Schrag, in Sacramento, what were your thoughts on listening to Secretary Dam just now? PETER SCHRAG (Sacramento Bee): Well, it was, in a way, predictable since we'd read in the morning papers, ah, more or less what Secretary Dam had to say. There are obviously enormous numbers of questions, some of which were I think highlighted by his statement. It seemed to me that among other things there seems to be divergence between the administration's stated objectives in Nicaragua and what appear to be the objectives of the contras. I think one of the things I'd like to ask Secretary Dam is whether in fact our objective is not the overthrow of the government in Nicaragua rather than simply the interdiction of the supply of weapons to El Salvador. There are obviously a whole string of questions. If we didn't know about the CIA involvement, though I think we should have surmised it, ah, in the mining, ah, the direct CIA involvement, since obviously you can't buy those mines in J.C. Penneys in Tegusegalpa, ah, what else are we doing under the name of covert action that would be, that would anger the American people and the Congress? I....

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MACNEIL: Mr. Mc, I'm sorry. SCHRAG: Excuse me. Go ahead.

MACNEIL: No. Finish your sentence. I'm sorry. SCHRAG: No, as I say, I think there are a whole string of questions that remain to be answered.

MACNEIL: Uh huh. Mr. McQuaid, in, ah, from the Manchester Union Leader, what were your thoughts on listening to the secretary? JOSEPH MCQUAID (Manchester Union Leader): Well, I wouldn't, I wouldn't wanna say that he didn't say anything new for your news program tonight. I think he finally, towards the end of his remarks got to the nub of the matter, that is U.S. policy in Central America, what is it, what should it be? I wish that, ah, this Senate vote and the House vote tonight were merely a reaction to the mining of the Nicaraguan harbor. And if that was all it was, I would, ah, be the first to tell the Reagan administration to knock off the mining, but I fear not. There seems to be abroad in the land this kind of Gary Hart syndrome, where if they take New Jersey, then we're gonna start getting upset. But as long as they in Central America and perhaps Mexico, they being the communists, that everything is fine and dandy. And I fear for the day when we do have to start fighting down there. Last week, the, ah, administration, which is guilty of some of the hypocrisy that is going on in Washington, ah, rushed forth to deny that there were any contingency plans to fight a war in Central America. I hope on that one that they're lying through their teeth.

MACNEIL: Uh huh. Mr. Foster, of the Milwaukee Journal, what were your thoughts in listening to the secretary? RICHARD FOSTER (Milwaukee Journal): Well, he expressed the viewpoint of the administration with his characteristic artfulness. But I think his explanation is just preposterous. It's, ah, it's insulting, you know, I think. What the administration is doing is refusing to be judged by outsiders, namely the World Court. I think that if the administration had thought it had a prayer of success before that, before that tribunal, it certainly would have gone before it and made its case, as it should have, as indeed the Carter administration did in 1979. As it is, they've simply, they've refused to be bound by the, by the jurisdiction of the court in Central America for two years. And I just think that's, that's, that's a very arrogant viewpoint. They concealed their actions moreover not only from the American people but apparently from key members of the Central Intelligence Committee. The intended victims of this supposedly covert action certainly knew what was going on. In fact, it was

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intended for them to know what was going on. So I don't understand why the secretary of anyone else in the administration thinks it makes any sense to keep it from the American people and from Congress.

MACNEIL: Let me just ask each of you, quickly, ah, Mr. Schrag, do you disapprove of the mining itself? Do you think that was a wrong thing to do? SCHRAG: Yes, I think, I, I disapprove not only of the mining, I disapprove of the whole support of the contras against the government that is sovereign government with which we have diplomatic relations.

MACNEIL: And I presume you do, Mr. Foster. FOSTER: Absolutely.

MACNEIL: You've as much as said so. FOSTER: Absolutely.

MACNEIL: But, Mr. McQuaid, you, do you approve of the mining? MCQUAID: I would have approved of the mining if it had stayed covert. This, this, ah, whole hullabaloo that has been raised in the last week is a bit of a phoney. Newsweek magazine reports this week that this was pretty much common knowledge back in February that the mining was being done with CIA orchestration. The, the whole new thing seems to be that the CIA got a little closer themselves. I don't see. I don't understand the, where the line should be drawn. Everyone knew, Senator Leahy, ah, last night, said that he had been fully informed and it wasn't any surprise to him. There are some people who suggest that Senator Goldwater might have been informed and forgotten.

MACNEIL: All right. Thank you. Jim?

LEHRER: Mr. Foster, Mr. McQuaid's right, isn't, isn't he? Isn't there kind of a tone of phoneyess to this outrage, ah, in the Congress? FOSTER: Well, I don't think so. I think it's perfectly justifiable. It's, it's inevitable.

LEHRER: No, but I mean the fact that they should have know or, or did know but they just didn't want to accept it. FOSTER: Well, there is some discussion and debate and uncertainty as to whether the administration was full and frank. Senator Goldwater claims he didn't know. See, it strains credulity, at least my credulity to think that the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee would have been told about a very dramatic active war, which this is, and then forgotten about it. To suggest that he's over the hill, I think is unfair and irrelevant.

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LERHER: Uh huh. Mr. Schrag, what about, ah, Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen made the point today that everybody, same, similar point to what Mr. McQuaid just made, that, ah, when the mining was discovered and reported several weeks ago and the United States was known to be supporting the contras, everybody should have figured out then that the United States was involved, why the outrage and upsetness now? SCHRAG: Well, I, I, I agree with Mr. McQuaid. I think that everybody, I, we certainly surmise that the, that we were very involved. As I said, it, that kind of technology doesn't come out of the, out of the dime store in Honduras. It seems to me that the Congress, whether, whether the Senate Intelligence Committee was informed or not, I think the Congress was using this, as they used a number of things during Vietnam, ah, ah, to, in a sense, justify the outrage that was, in a sense, coming home now. And how much complicity there was, I don't know. It's clear that the only people from whom this operation had to be covert was the American people. Obviously, the Nicaraguans knew that the mining was going on. And they could have, I assume, figured out who was doing it and what the source was.

LEHRER: Mr. McQuaid, what do you think the administration oughtta do now? MCQUAID: I think that the president himself should go directly to the American people during the period when the congressmen are back there and, ah, and, and enunciate it this way. That, 'It is put-up-or-shut-up time in Central America. This is my foreign policy. Give me until the fall. Repudiate it, if you will, in the elections, but until then, ah, let me do it.' Buckley has said this week that, ah, that, that Reagan is right but the problem is he doesn't have the subservient Senate. And the Senate, a third of which is up for election itself, I think is concerned about Mondale and Hart apparently scurrying around the country as they criticize the policy and decide whether we give up on Monday or Tuesday. I think the Reagan administration has to go directly to the people on this issue. congregating
LEHRER: And say what? MCQUAID: And, and...

LEHRER: We wanna get rid of you? MCQUAID: ...and ask a question, really. Uh, say that what they have said all along, but in a hit-and-miss fashion. I go back to the point I, I raised before, Weinberger last week denying there were any contingency plans to send troops to Central America. You've gotta come clean. You've gotta draw the line and say, uh, this is where the Reagan administration is on the issue of Central America, uh, this is where we're gonna go with it, and, uh, we'll stand for election on this.

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LEHRER: What do you think would happen, Mr. Foster, if Mr. Reagan did that? FOSTER: I doubt it would be very popular. Uh, I think the mood in the Congress certainly is, at least as far as the mining in El Salvador, I mean, in, the mining in Nicaragua is concerned, is very much against him. I think up on the Hill they are angry not only at the, uh, the secrecy with which this was done, but the very fact that it was done at all. I mean, we're dealing here, we're talking about an act of war, and when that's done, it should be done, it seems to me, and I think the members of the Congress feel this way, with the involvement of the Congress.

LEHRER: Mm. FOSTER: Now, it's bad that he didn't come clean, but I think more is necessary than that.

LEHRER: Mr. Schrag, what do you think of Mr. McQuaid's suggestion to the president? SCHRAG: I think what the president oughta do, which is a totally impos... totally unlikely outcome, is to start trying to negotiate and start trying to talk. The Sandinistas made a number of overtures, uh, and we have spurned them. We said they're not serious. We didn't even try to find out whether they were serious.

LEHRER: I see. Well, look, Mr. Schrag, in Sacramento, Calif., thank you very much for being with us. Mr. McQuaid in New Hampshire, thanks to you. Mr. Foster of Milwaukee here in Washington, thanks to you. Robin?

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